

# Critical dialogue Twelve frames per second

by Chuck Kleinhans

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[William Guynn's article on \*Cahiers du cinema\*](#) in this issue (pp 32-35) provides an important argument in the on-going analysis and evaluation of the last ten years of French film criticism. In the past decade French critics and filmmakers have done more — quantitatively and qualitatively — to debate and develop Marxist film theory and practice than any group has done since the Soviet 20s. We in the English speaking world have much to learn from this ferment: from the mistakes and from the positive achievements. Guynn's article raises the major and key questions: what were (and are) the *politics* of the *Cahiers* critics, and were those good politics?

I believe Guynn only tells half the story. His conclusions are severely compromised by a reductionist and simplistic approach. Therefore I want to present some points as comment and corrective, at the same time hoping others will join in an ongoing discussion of recent French criticism and filmmaking and the political issues involved.

### CAHIERS' INFLUENCE.

Guynn claims *Cahiers* has been followed with considerable awe in the U.S. This isn't true. The general attitude of U.S. film scholars and critics has been to regret *Cahiers*' left turn. Mention of post-'68 *Cahiers* by Sarris, for example, is always coupled with a hearty sneer. The same attitude from a left position characterizes *Cinéaste*'s treatment of *Cahiers*. In fact, the basic attitude among U.S. left critics has been to ignore, or dismiss without extensive examination, the work of *Cahiers*, *Cinéthique*, etc.

A distinct minority of U.S. left film people have followed *Cahiers* closely, and then they've usually been critical. Furthermore, that part of *Cahiers* which has been translated and discussed in England and North America

has tended to be early-phase material ("Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism," and the YOUNG MR. LINCOLN analysis especially). The articles of the more militant and more Maoist *Cahiers* period, dominated by direct political argument, are *never* discussed by those critics who have been most forceful in promoting recent French film thought — especially the group around *Screen*. (Due to CP influence on *Screen*?) When *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* became more overtly Marxist-Leninist, Anglo-North American followers by and large shifted their attention to the "non-political" (i.e., formalist) work of *Communications* (Barthes, Metz, Bellour, etc.), *Ça*, etc. In fact very little is known or discussed of the most clearly Marxist French work of the past decade.

## SOCIALIST REALISM AND MAO.

Guynn substitutes prejudice for fact in discussing Mao's position on art and issues of Socialist Realism. I invite readers to read Mao's writings on art and culture for themselves before accepting Guynn's interpretation. As for Socialist Realism, attacking it has become a banality of current left cultural thought. Can anyone be found to defend it anymore, save perhaps China's "unrepentant capitalist roaders," the Gang of Four? Yet, while no one will defend the doctrine, neither will anyone equally dismiss its finest U.S. film product, *SALT OF THE EARTH* (see article in JC 10/11). I would suggest that to balance Guynn's views readers look at Stefan Morawski's discussion of Socialist Realism (chapter 7) in his *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*.

## REDUCTIONISM.

Guynn's statement, that *Cahiers* never has "been able to resolve definitively its contradictions," reveals the underlying weakness of his analysis throughout the article. As Guynn should know, contradictions cannot be "resolved definitively" in any political project because new conditions create new contradictions. Since he proceeds without an adequate understanding of dialectics, Guynn sees no problem with his reductionist exercise. Thus he makes a handful of articles in *Cahiers* stand for a decade's output. Historical development and change is obliterated in a model of two homogenous stages: first PCF, then Maoist. However any adequate understanding of *Cahiers* (even by bourgeois standards of analysis) would have to deal with the complicated relation of *Cahiers* to the left positions advocated by *Positif*, *Cinéthique*, *La Nouvelle Critique*, and *Tel Quel*, just to mention the most obvious publications. Guynn has nothing to say about the influence of Althusser's politics, Lacan's psychoanalysis, Metz's semiology, or Brecht's aesthetics, yet every issue of *Cahiers* in the period shows these theories' impact on the magazine, usually overtly. Somehow Guynn discusses *Cahiers* without ever really discussing its film criticism specifically — a rather revealing gap. As a result, Guynn's article comes

close to being a conspiracy theory. We need a much better basis on which to construct a political critique of *Cahiers*.

## THE "AUTONOMY" OF ART.

Guynn's presentation of Lenin's views and the Bolshevik '20s is highly selective at best, and distinctly misleading for the most part. Because every socialist state, past and future, takes over an economy organized for the benefit of a few rather than the masses of people, it must face a period of scarcity while organizing production for socialism. The arts are no exception. The revolutionary party, through the state, has to set priorities in the arts. During the Russian Civil War an acute paper shortage restricted all publishing, for example, so hard decisions had to be made about who and what got published. Lenin himself intervened in such matters, criticizing Lunacharsky for printing 5,000 copies of a Mayakovsky poem (Letter of May 6, 1921). I think any unprejudiced reading of Lenin (see his *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress, 1970) shows that Lenin was at least of two minds about party control of art — sometimes favoring it, sometimes not.

Certainly, throughout his career, Lenin thought Marxists had something to offer artists. Guynn apparently does not share this view, for he ridicules *Cahiers'* attempt to develop their cultural politics. Yet U.S. cultural workers face a problem similar to *Cahiers'* situation. There is no revolutionary left party with both a politics correct enough to rally a significant portion of the existing left and deep roots in the working class. What then should radical culture workers do? *Cahiers'* solutions, such as its "relay runners," were awkward, perhaps silly, certainly naïve, but they were genuine attempts to deal with a real situation. In sharp contrast, Guynn can only ridicule the very effort to do anything. That's political purism taken to the point of despair.

Although I have many differences with Guynn's version of things, I think he asks the essential questions: What are the politics of *Cahiers*, and are those good politics? These questions are studiously evaded by most of those who profess the importance of recent French film thought and filmmaking. Such avoidance is even practiced by the *Cahiers* crowd. In a recent interview, Serge Daney, staff member since 1964 and current co-editor-in-chief, carefully sidesteps political discussion of the past decade ("Les *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1968-1977: interview with Serge Daney," *The Thousand Eyes*, no. 2, 1977, 18-31). Daney's evasion must be challenged: What have been and are *Cahiers'* politics? Are those good politics? The questions won't go away.

Finally, even asking those questions, and answering them, is insufficient. The creation of a Marxist film theory and film practice adequate to the political and social realities of our time remains a task before us. However awkwardly, *Cahiers* contributed to that job, and deserves our critical attention.

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